



Episode 76

Saturday Night is the Loneliest Night of the Week

A forensics tournament is a study in ebb and flow. From the moment of arrival until the first schematics are distributed, adrenaline is flowing in every vein, seeking a quick release in the first round. Competitors want to compete, judges want to eat, and the tournament director wants to launch the leaky ship of debate into the flowing sea of tab. Since the second round almost inevitably follows the first without a break, the adrenaline has barely a chance to make a noticeable recession before it washes over everyone yet again, with nearly the completeness of the first wave.

The tide goes out as the waiting for the third round begins. Voices are less loud, time-passing activities are more pointed, concentration levels are lower, until all the glands have dried up, leaving behind a muddy beach with a few scattered fish feebly flapping their tails in the last throws of oxygen deprivation and the odd horseshoe crab scrambling to escape the curious seven-year-olds. Time passes in ponderous ticks and tocks, unmarked by events, a gravitational trough in Einstein's space/time continuum. Then, suddenly, there is the crash of an unexpected strong white wave as the water rises anew in response to the call of "Schematics!" Energy levels quickly sore, minds refocus, stomachs tighten, brains buzz, the room is awash again in adrenaline as the next round begins. Followed again by the ebbing until the fourth wave of schematics arrives on-shore for the next round.

To Hans Castorp, the ebb and flow is not unlike the making of a motion picture, where enormous amounts of niggling, detail-oriented activity coordinating technicians and effects and backgrounds and actors are occasionally interrupted by the actual running of a camera to film a scene, where a ten hour day at best yields two or three minutes of usable film. But a film shoot is his milieu, where he is in charge, and every action is performed under his hegemony. A tournament like the Manhattan Lodestone, where every action is performed seemingly willy nilly, leaves him confused and enervated. For three hours this afternoon he and Clavdia have scoured the hallways, examining the faces that have passed them by, pressing their noses against the glass panes of classroom doors to glare in a debaters in their rounds, assessing their looks, their attitudes, their film potential. By seven o'clock in the evening, Hans has had it. If nearly every teenaged actor looked the

same to him before he began seeking out amateurs, now nearly every teenaged amateur is looking the same. And, in his eyes, it is not a pretty sight.

"I am bored beyond all countenance," he says to his casting director. Hans is sprawled out in the auditorium, his head back, his long legs stretched over the seat in front of him. He looks as if he has just fallen from the balcony. With his backwards baseball over his long hair, and the sun glasses he has worn indoors the entire day, he is a vision of transplanted Hollywood.

"We haven't been very successful, have we?" Clavdia says.

"You exaggerate, my love. We have been failing with a passion known only to Saharan salmon fishermen. A rabbi in a mosque would do better than we're doing." He looks at the large round woman over the top of his dark glasses. "Have you ever seen an uglier group of teenagers in all your life?" he asks.

"They're not that bad," Clavdia replies. She is standing in the aisle of the auditorium. "You're just used to actors, with all their blow-drying and tooth-capping and genetic inability to develop pimples."

"I did want a natural kid, didn't I?"

"That's why we came here, Hans."

"What was I thinking about?"

The auditorium is empty except for a handful of individuals scattered about reading or napping. Most of the activity at the moment is in the cafeteria, where tuna-and-sprouts sandwiches made by the Lodestone parents are being sold by the Lodestone children for a dollar apiece. They are no bargain. There is one more round tonight before the festivities shut down for the day. Tomorrow the break rounds begin.

Clavdia is carrying a sheath of yellow papers, on which is printed the following:

We are looking for a male teenage actor

15 to 17

A Dustin Hoffman / Johnny Depp / Judge Reinhold character type

Tall, lanky, preferably not a professional actor

Audition dates and times to be announced

A phone number is printed at the bottom of the page.

So far she has handed out six sheets to possible contenders. But none of them were so promising that they seemed worth the trip out here.

"Mr. Lo Pat has a list of other tournaments I can try if this one comes up blank," she says.

"I'm going back to California Monday," Hans tells her. "Other tournaments be damned."

"You'd send me to those other tournaments alone?"

"Of course. That's your job."

"Thanks a lot," Clavdia mutters under her breath.

"I never should have come here," Hans continues. "My hopes were too high. I had a vision of Schwab's drugstore and Lana Turner and the perfect kid walking right up to me and we'd grab him and throw him on the next plane to L.A. and he would test like a dream and the next thing you know--"

"I would like to thank the Academy."

"I can't even thank the high school." Hans unfolds himself and puts his feet on the floor. "Let's get out of here," he says. "I'm getting hungry."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Elaine's? Do people still eat at Elaine's?"

"Of course they do."

"Then let's eat there. Let's get a cab."

"It's awfully early for dinner. It's only seven."

"Elaine will let us drink. I'm sure of it. As a matter of fact, she'll encourage it."

He stands up and stretches, then he and Clavdia walk up the aisle toward the exit. They are an odd couple, with his height and her stoutness. At the auditorium door they are met by another couple coming in, a blowsy redhead and a white-haired goatlike man. For a moment there is a dance of nods and excuse-me's, and for no particular reason Clavdia hands the white-haired man one of her broadsheets as she and Hans disappear out the door.

"I know who that is," Amnea says, as she and Tarnish continue walking to the front of the auditorium. They have come here to get away from the various noises of the cafeteria and the judges' lounge.

"Who?" Tarnish asks, glancing at the yellow sheet in his hand.

"That was Hans Castorp. The film director. I would swear it. But what in the name of God would he be doing here at the Original Vaganza?"

Tarnish hands her the broadsheet.

"I was right!" she says. "That was Hans Castorp."

"Apparently so."

"I wonder if he found his lanky actor?"

"Maybe. Maybe he hired your son."

"Chesney?" Amnea laughs. "He would be the last person in the world to want to be an actor."

"One never knows with teenagers, Amnea. I see a lot of them, and sometimes I see them a few years later, and what they thought they might want to be, they hardly ever are. And what they are, they had never even thought of."

"Not Chesney. Not as an actor, anyhow." She hands the sheet back to Tarnish. At the front of the auditorium they sit down and change the subject.

Not Chesney? Maybe. Maybe not?

But if not Chesney, who?

That is the question of the moment.

Strangest in the Night

It is a dark and stormy night.

The rain of yesterday has returned as the last Saturday rounds of the Vaganza are coming to an end. At first, the slight wisp of water hitting against a classroom window. A drop here, another drop there, then steadier, harder, colder.

And then the lightning. A flash far off to the south, silent save for the most distant of rumblings following in its wake. Darkness. Then another flash, closer this time, with a closer rumble.

By the time the last team has departed, the fury of the night has been unleashed. Rain pounds against the brick walls, thunder and lightning explode simultaneously. Lisa Torte, as she stares out the window at the avenue below, is happy to be safe and warm inside the old Lodestone building. The team of Invoice and the Veil policemen who are entered in the Vaganza have long ago left on the school bus. Lisa has her car here tonight, and she thinks that she will wait until the weather lightens before setting out. It can't possibly keep up with this intensity for long.

Her last job before leaving is to make sure the perishable foods in the judges' lounge, if any, are locked up in the fridge for the night. In the office downstairs, Mr. Lo Pat and his sepulchral tab team are pairing the break rounds for tomorrow morning, one of the most difficult jobs of the tournament, since each round needs three judges, stretching to the limit the available pools of judges. Lisa is on the third floor, having worked her way up from the basement to verify that the building, aside from the tabbers, is empty. She has checked every room along the way, closing every classroom door and turning out every classroom light as she has verified that it is vacant. She is in the last classroom now, and she turns away from the window, walks to the doorway and flips out the room lights as she goes back into the hall.

There is a slightly eerie feeling to being alone in the corridor after the convulsive busyness of the day's activities. Every door is closed, and the only illumination is the string of widely-spaced ceiling lights leading down the hallway to the stairwell. With no other distractions, Lisa can clearly hear the pounding of the rain outside, even though she is nowhere near a window, and there is an attic above her, separating the third floor from the roof.

"What a storm," she says aloud, almost to reassure herself that she is safe. At which moment a blast of light and sound crashes through the hallway, followed by an electrical buzzing, and then, like a match in the wind, the lights in the corridor go out.

Lisa is left in total darkness.

"Hello?"

Her voice is soft, low, echoless.

"The lights must have gone out."

She does not stop to marvel that she is talking to herself, or that her conversation is belaboring the obvious. She edges to the wall, and with her hand out, walks to the nearest classroom. When she reaches it, she opens the door. Looking out the windows she can

see that not only Lodestone, but all of the surrounding buildings, have lost electricity. Her first thought is for the tournament.

"Mr. Lo Pat is going to have a fit." She can imagine him in the tab room, watching his computer work disappear into the electrical ether. But then she remembers that he always tabs on a portable, and that he has provided his tab team with their equipment, so they are probably already on their backup battery power, and none the worse for wear for it.

But what about her? She has to get out of Manhattan in what may be, as far as she knows, a city-wide blackout. She could be stranded here all night.

For the first time since the lights went out, she feels a frisson of fear. Before she can do anything, she has to make it to the first floor, to the office where the others are. No one knows that she is still here. Maybe they'll lock her in. Maybe she won't be able to get out, even if she tries. Will Mr. Lo Pat remember that he has asked her to check the rooms? Or will he forget all about her in the confusion of the blackout and the need to finish the tabbing in the dark?

"We gotta get out of here," Lisa says.

There is only the tiniest bit of ambient illumination in the classroom from outside the windows, but there is enough for her to make her way to the door. Once she reaches the hallway, it is as black as the deepest moment of sleep, the moment from which you do not awake...

"The stairs have to be that way," she says, pointing. Continuing to run one hand along the wall, she edges her way down the corridor. She cannot remember a place as dark and as silent. She cannot remember feeling this alone.

"Holy mother of mayonnaise!" Lisa's face hits a wall that seems to rise out of nowhere. She rubs away the pain from her nose. "What the hell?" She reaches out. "Aha!" The doorway to the stairs. Now all she has to do is go down to the first floor and find the tab room. She is practically there.

She carefully slides her feet forward, reaching out with both hands. She wants to feel the edge of the stairs, or the handrail, before flying downstairs head-first. If it was as dark as sleep in the corridor, it is even darker in the stairwell, as dark as death in the depth of night, at the hour when the wolves howl and the rats scurry and the spiders weave their thickest webs. Dark, and silent. No movement, nothing, not even the rain anymore, nothing but her own breathing as she edges toward the stairs, and then she holds her breath, so the silence is as strong as sin pulling mortals to their final perdition.

"What am I thinking?" she mutters to herself, her hand still feeling for the rail. "I'm making myself into a wreck. I am alone on a very mundane stairwell, and as soon as I find the rail I'll walk myself down and discuss the Knicks with Mr. Lo Pat and wonder

what all the commotion was about. I mean, I am totally alone here."

And that is the moment when she hears the footsteps.

"Oh my God!"

They are above her, coming down from the attic.

Who can be coming down from the attic?

What can be coming down from the attic?

The footsteps get closer. Closer... She can hear breathing. And then--

"What the hell?"

The man bumps into her, and in total fear of falling down the stairs she grabs him, and he grabs her, and they stumble, and a moment later the two of them are lying in a heap on the floor.

At which point the lights come back on.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asks him, pulling herself away and standing up.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he replies in kind, similarly pulling himself together and dusting himself off.

"I'm working at the tournament. I've got an excuse."

"I'm working here too. I'm judging."

"So what were you doing in the attic?"

"I had a round off. I found a place to put my feet up, and I guess I fell asleep. The storm woke me up."

She shakes her head. "Let's get out of here before the lights go out again," she says.

The two of them walk down the stairs. "I've been meaning to talk to you," he says. "Although I didn't think we'd run into each other quite this way."

"I don't know if we have all that much to talk about."

He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a Snickers bar. "No," he says, "we have a lot to talk about. Like the way you're ruining Policy at Veil, for one thing."

"I am not ruining Policy," she says.

"That isn't what Tara tells me. And I can see for myself that you've got Invoice O'Connor entered as an LDer, for God's sake. That's about as low as you can get."

"Invoice is doing well here, Seth. If he won his last round, he'll probably break."

"Being good at something bad does not make that thing good."

"LD is not bad."

"Neither is Policy. But Tara tells me you're dumping Policy completely in your pathetic attempt to take over the Veil team."

"I have taken over the Veil team. And I have not dumped Policy. In fact, I'm learning Policy so that I'll be able to coach it."

"You'll never be able to coach Policy. You don't have what it takes."

They have reached the first floor now, and they stand and face each other in the main entryway of the building.

"You're going to kill Policy at Veil of Ignorance," Seth goes on, taking the last bite of his candy bar. "It's a crime against forensics, and I won't let it happen."

"And what do you intend to do about it," Lisa asks.

"I don't know. But I will make sure that real debate lives at one of the schools that underpins the activity. I won't let you take that away from those kids."

"You have nothing to say about it."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll see, Lisa Torte."

"You will see nothing, Seth B. Obomash. You are out of it. You are old news. You've forfeited your right to be a part of what happens at that school."

He narrows his eyes. "One sin does not a sinner make."

"Tell that to the priests!"

She turns away and stalks down to the office to find Mr. Lo Pat to tell him that she is going home, leaving Obomash to stand there and watch her receding figure pass down the hallway.

One sin does not a sinner make? Obomash is fuming. Then how many does it take? When do you know you've got the right number under your belt?

Seth B. Obomash rolls his empty Snickers wrapper into a ball and tosses it toward a nearby garbage can. It falls in neatly.

"Two points," he whispers under his breath as he walks out the front door.

Will Hans Castorp ever find the perfect teenager?

Will Clavdia Chauchet have to travel to tournaments alone from now on?

Will Seth and Lisa resort to a duel at sunrise?

Will the Secret Service be replaced by flies on the wall?

You'll never know if your only searching place is next week's episode: "Euphonious: Music to the ears or Latin diss?"